[231] PART TWO

An attempt to compile a gram mar of the Mataco tongue. 121

I

Origin of this section of the work.

In honor of Juan María Gutiérrez

While we were awaiting the assistance for which we had asked, and which would probably be some time coming, I thought that I could best use all the leisure time which was being forced upon me, by attempting to gather words from the surrounding Indians.

I had heard on repeated occasions that these savages had only an impoverished language with scant words and forms. Because of what I had read (which admittedly was not much) in the field of philology, I was persuaded that the very opposite was probably closer to the truth, and I wished to make some personal observations in order to arrive at a more solid opinion on the subject and then communicate my findings to others. Just before leaving Buenos Aires I had had a conversation with Doctor Juan María Gutiérrez, and he had said the following to me:

"If you have time, take up and study the language of these savages. Because of the complete lack of traditions and of archeological data regarding these Indians, the discipline of linguistics is called to play an important part in the discovery of their origin, or at least of their correlation -- if such exists -- with other peoples in the remote past; remote, that is, when compared with the present known history of man. Apart from this, linguistics is fast becoming a science, and given time will most certainly surprise us with the splendid results which it will achieve in outlining the history of humanity."

To which he added by way of encouragement: [232]

"The field of linguistics is still for the greater part virgin and therefore promises an abundant harvest to anyone who cultivates it -- take advantage of this opportunity, for you will not be wasting your time."

How could I possibly lend a deaf ear to such expert advice? Even though I might not be equipped to contribute more than an insignificant pebble to the linguistic pyramid, I yet felt stimulated by his words, and to a certain extent committed. Later, while I cudgeled my brain in an effort to untangle and isolate some rule from that mass of words which I had been able to collect, I would every now and then be successful and the resultant feeling of delight in accomplishment would be augmented by the anticipation of the further delight which would be mine when I returned to Buenos Aires and presented my findings to Gutiérrez and talked at length with him.

He was a man of great natural talent which had been magnified by deep erudition. Love of the arts and sciences was uppermost in his life. His tolerance was proportional to his vast knowledge and his free way of thinking. He was affable in manner, which was fitting to one who owed everything to his own efforts and who had experienced all of life's vicisitudes. At seventy and in his lofty literary and administrative position he knew how to inspire, even if with just a word, the most modest student, and to listen to and discuss with the most cordial deference the problems of the least of those who visited him, which is not such a common thing among men of his age and knowledge.

But the pleasure of speaking to him again was to be denied me. On my return the news which caught my attention in the first newspaper which I bought after landing was that of his death, which had occurred on the eve of my arrival!

May your memory, oh Gutiérrez, remain ever as alive and lasting in the hearts of your countrymen as it is in the heart of the author of these lines, who will preserve it in all its freshness! Be pleased to accept as dedicated to you, and protect with your name, the few paltry lines which I may write in the following pages on the subject of the Indian languages -- for it is to you that I owe them, and without you as patron I would not have dared to publish them!

II

Beginnings of the work. Particulars of a personal nature.

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At the beginning of my labors I had but little hope of crowning my efforts with any success. We had on board with us an Indian